

# Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill

## Stage 1 debate

10 December 2020

### Age Scotland welcomes the opportunity to brief MSPs ahead of this important debate.

We are in general supportive of the measures of this Bill and believe it is important to forward plan in light of the current danger posed to public health by COVID-19.

We are, however, concerned about certain aspects of the Bill that may have the unintended consequence of disenfranchising older people across Scotland.

We would like to draw your attention to:

- Section 8(4) which provide for the regulations to specify particular days or times when certain descriptions or categories of persons eligible to vote in person may do so.
- Bringing forward the postal application deadline to the 6<sup>th</sup> April 2021.
- Age Scotland stresses the need for inclusive communication regarding any changes as part of the measures needed due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and call for a full equality impact assessment to be carried out for this Bill.
- We welcome the provision in the Bill for emergency proxies. This can allow those who are forced to self-isolate on polling day to safely exercise their democratic right.

### Key statistics

#### 39% of polling staff are aged 60 and over

The average age of polling station workers in four councils in the 2016 Scottish parliament election was 54.8, with around 39% over 60, and the oldest being 84.

#### Population Overview

There are **2,153,767** people over the age of 50 living in Scotland. This is 40% of the total Scottish population.

#### 472,000 over 60s don't use the internet

According to the Scottish Household Survey only 66% of adults aged 60 and over use the internet, highlighting the importance for information about the upcoming election to not be shared only through digital communications.

## Provision Section 8(4)

This provision is intended to allow the Scottish Government the ability to introduce regulations that would potentially restrict voters of a particular age, or in a particular area, who do intend to exercise their right to vote in person, to do so only on specified days or at specified times.

Whilst we understand the intention behind this, Age Scotland believes that introducing measures that will restrict people to vote on certain days or times by age group will likely cause confusion and would, therefore, require clear and inclusive communication in advance. This would be essential to ensure that no one is prevented from voting and should be done using a variety of methods that don't heavily rely on online information and advice.

We worry that requirements for age groups to vote at a certain time or day could negatively impact unpaid carers who would normally support an older person to vote and who may not be able to vote at the same time. We are also concerned that grouping potentially vulnerable people together at one time, and in one place, may be an off-putting idea for many older voters. It also fails to take into account that people's plans can change unexpectedly, for example due to ill health or transport issues which may mean they are unable to meet an allocated time slot to vote.

## Postal vote application deadline

Age Scotland understands the time it takes to process postal applications, and the extra pressures if there is an increase in requests, but we worry that shortening the deadline to such an extent may have a negative impact on older people and unpaid carers who may want to vote by post, in particular those who would be doing so for the first time. If the anticipated large volume of registrations for postal votes is expected to be difficult to manage, recruiting additional staff to process registrations would lessen the risk of people missing the deadline to register and being disenfranchised.

If, however, a shortened deadline is necessary, we reiterate again the importance of clearly communicating these changes. This cannot be digital by default but must include traditional forms of communication in order to be as inclusive and accessible as possible considering that only 66% of adults over 60 use the internet meaning 472,000 would be excluded.<sup>1</sup> Information on these changes should also be produced in different formats, such as easy read, audio, braille, and a variety of different languages.

## Polling Places

While the issue is not addressed in the Bill, we believe it is important to note that polling station staff often fall into the older age group. This could lead to difficulties in delivering the election if high numbers of older polling staff do not volunteer due to health concerns. It is essential that measures to mitigate this, such as the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), be considered in further detail.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-household-survey-2019-key-findings/pages/9/>

## Want to find out more?

As Scotland's national charity supporting people over the age of 50, Age Scotland works to improve older people's lives and promote their rights and interests. We aim to help people love later life, whatever their circumstances. We want Scotland to be the best place in the world to grow older.

Our Policy, Communications and Campaigns team research, analyse and comment on a wide range of public policy issues affecting older people in Scotland.

Our work is guided by the views and needs of older people themselves.

### Further information

Contact the Age Scotland Policy, Communications and Campaigns team:

[policycomms@agescotland.org.uk](mailto:policycomms@agescotland.org.uk)

0333 323 2400

Twitter [@agescotland](https://twitter.com/agescotland)

Facebook [/agescotland](https://www.facebook.com/agescotland)

Linkedin [Age-Scotland](https://www.linkedin.com/company/age-scotland)

[www.agescotland.org.uk](http://www.agescotland.org.uk)